

Alice Royce Girl Detective And the ASSASINS CLUB

No. 4 in the Series
of a Clever Girl's
Extraordinary Ex-
periences.

By Charles Somerville.
ALICE ROYCE ran swiftly from the living rooms of her apartment into the hallway, startled by a cry of alarm from her maid, for the girl on opening the door in response to a sharp, sudden rattle of the electric bell had been almost carried off her feet by the inrush of a wild-eyed man seemingly half crazed with excitement, who shouted:

"Mademoiselle Royce—Mademoiselle Royce! I must see her! I must see her quickly—for God's sake—please!"

As Alice Royce guided her queer visitor into the front room of the apartment she observed that the man was all of a tremble, that his teeth chattered as crazily as his eyes rolled. He was a short, wiry man of forty years or thereabouts with a bush of black curly hair over a thin, sallow face. He affected a small black mustache and goatee; the mustache evidently designed to be worn uptwisted in military fashion, but now, with its drooping, sprayed ends, adding to the general disorder of his appearance. In a vague way the girl detective was aware that she had seen her visitor somewhere before.

He tossed himself into the chair she offered and sat for some seconds crazily twisting the soft felt hat he held clutched in his shaking hands. He was so evidently on the point of hysteria that he tried repeatedly to speak, but could not force the words through his chattering teeth.

The girl placed a calm hand on his shoulder.

"Come—come," she said in slow, low tones. "Try and bring yourself together. What have you to fear?"

"My life, mademoiselle," said the man before her. "My very life is at stake. Unless on this very day I myself commit a murder—Dieu—I myself will be killed! I am not insane, mademoiselle. These are the facts. I must destroy a human creature or be myself destroyed—unless, mademoiselle, you perhaps can save me. I have come to you—in very despair I have come to you."

"You know me?" asked the girl detective.

"Yes, mademoiselle; you will perhaps remember the affair of the Vantine diamonds? It is I, mademoiselle, who furnished the imitation of the genuine necklace. It is I who am the expert in such things that you sought out, Mademoiselle Royce."

As he was speaking, the recollection of the man's identity had come readily to the young professional investigator.

For upward of an hour the Frenchman went on in explanation of his visit and his condition of terror. There were times when his English failed him completely and he arose, pacing the floor, speaking volubly in his native tongue. The girl became more and more deeply interested, and once she raised a hand to halt him while at the telephone at her desk she called up Washington on the long distance telephone and was placed in connection with the ——— Embassy.

"This is Alice Royce," she said to one of the secretaries who responded. "I understand the Ambassador intends coming to New York on the 2 o'clock limited to-morrow. He must not carry out this intention. He would be in gravest danger in New York. Who am I? Speak to Assistant Secretary Blank at the State Department. He will tell you that I am responsible and no mere alarmist. He will tell you that my warning must certainly be heeded. Meanwhile, please have the chief of your secret agents telephone me" (she paused and gave the number). "I assure you it is a matter of the gravest concern."

It was indeed an alarming, terrifying revelation that Anatol d'Montrat, the man before her, had made in the turmoil and rush of his excited speech. The while he talked something like contempt for the little frightened man had crept into Alice Royce's mind. His story disclosed him to be a pitiful little egotist who in an imagined desperation of character and purpose had permitted himself to be drawn into a dangerous, murderous group of political malcontents and then, when the realization of how deeply he had been enchained came suddenly and terribly upon him, had given way

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to complete cowardice—to hysterical fear.

For, in short, Anatol d'Montrat had been designated by the "group"—"The Liberty Twelve" they called themselves—to commit no less a crime than murder. In the drawing of lots he had been "called" on the very night before the day he presented himself to Alice Royce to assassinate Count (let us say) Karomania.

He went into a full explanation of this "group," the characters who comprised its membership and the manner in which he himself had been drawn into its rendezvous and had come to stand as a candidate for choice as the one who was to end violently the life of the Karomanian Ambassador.

He said that the chief of the group was a queer little, florid, stout German whose source of income was mysterious but abundant. Evidently this leader of the band was really insane—a paranoiac who thought there had fallen upon himself a divine mission to destroy secretly the lives of the men who figured in the guidance of the world. His scheme looked toward the destruction of every ruler in the world, and not only the rulers themselves but their queens, their heirs and their most powerful and highly recognized advisers. Two of the other ten men were Russians embittered by prison terms served in Siberia. One of them had a little father in a Russian prison yard. His life was consecrated, he frequently averred, to a vengeance on Russian authorities to be so dreadful and sweeping that it would horrify the world.

Anatol himself had fallen under the influence of Herr Kruger, the little German chief, owing to nightly discussions of social wrongs that they held on a bench in Union Square. The acquaintance had been a chance one—as far as Anatol was concerned. He himself, although he had become an expert skilled workman in the fashioning of artistic jewelry, nursed the disappointment of grander ambitions. In his youth he had dreamed of a life to be crowned with fame as a great author, teacher and preacher. But the world had not listened to him. His literary products had been a failure. None, indeed, had ever seen the light. Gradually, in his disappointment, he had turned bitterly against the world, and it had been on a night when he sat on one of the park benches, darkly brooding, that little Herr Kruger with his strangely bright blue eyes had ensconced himself beside him and they had talked—talked for hours, in which gradually his new found acquaintance had painted, in a manner that fascinated Anatol while it frightened him his gigantic trouble scheme for the establishment of world-wide anarchy through world-wide assassination.

The next night Anatol had kept an appointment with Herr Kruger which resulted in the little Frenchman being, after due caution to secrecy and a frank avowal of the death that would befall him if he betrayed the secret of the "group's" existence, taken to the rendezvous of the Anarchist gang. This proved to be on the top floor of an old-fashioned brick house in one of the "Seventies" between First avenue and Avenue B, New York. There he met the other members. Save in the case of the two Russians, who it appears the German had invited to this country by correspondence, Anatol found that the other members of

the "group" had been gathered quite in the way he himself had been come upon. Herr Kruger, it seemed, haunted the parks with his half insane blue eyes sharply casting about for men whose demeanors of disappointment, dejection and brooding suggested that they might be possible welcome recruits to the organization by which he meant to stain crimson the steps of thrones, even the portals of the White House itself. Nearly every nationality was represented in the membership of "The Liberty Twelve." All were aliens to America. The nightly discussion of their wrongs and disappointments had brought them to a temper of ugliness in which they grinned as they chattered over their pet schemes for achieving the assassination of all the rulers of the world!

Anatol, it appeared, had been as free of tongue as any of them, talking loudly and dramatically of most ferocious deeds against society that he meant to commit. Meanwhile Herr Kruger always presided among them with the greatest calm and avowed sensation of pleasure over the murderous plots that he heard revealed. Incidentally, he also most liberally financed the "club." Most of the members had been men without occupation in the first place. But those who had been practicing a vocation in the beginning had, including Anatol, abandoned their employment and taken to living on the bounty of their German chief.

All this had gone on for several months, to Anatol's great enjoyment. While the plotting of assassinations had remained merely bombastic talk he had been in all his glory.

But—then! Three nights before Anatol confided to Alice Royce, Herr Kruger, with his blue eyes dancing more brightly and wildly than ever, had announced that the days of mere talk were at an end—the hour for action had struck.

The destruction of the lives of all the "enemies" of the society, Alice Royce heard with growing, eager attention, did not devolve on the American group alone. Kruger had, she learned, with mysterious financial resource and energy formed similar groups in European capitals and the general plan was to arouse fear and consternation everywhere in the world at once. Kruger, d'Montrat stammered, had drawn up in writing, in accordance with the plans and agreements from the other groups, a paper setting down the time, place and manner of all the contemplated crimes.

The Karomanian Ambassador had fallen as first choice among the victims of the plot in America. In his career it was known that from time to time he had through his secret agents caused the imprisonment or deportation of many Anarchists who had succeeded in edging their way past the United States immigration authorities. According to the big general plan of Kruger, as contained in the paper he had drawn up and which d'Montrat asserted he had seen with his own eyes, at the same time that his pistol rang out against Count

Clarendon in twenty other cities of Europe prominent men had also been marked for death. But who these had been the little Frenchman said he was too excited and distraught to remember. He described closely, however, the section of the desk in which this sinister document was hidden.

There had been, he said, a night of bitter denunciation of Count Clarendon by "The Liberty Twelve" when finally Herr Kruger had announced the drawing of lots for the appointment of the diplomat's murderer. The German had joined the others in the drawing, but in the end out of the folded paper slips carelessly tossed into a hat the gruesome paper containing the words "Thou art the man!" found itself between the fingers of little Anatol d'Montrat.

"Then they gave me this," sobbed the Frenchman, drawing from the inner breast pocket of his coat an ugly old steel magazine pistol. "I am to be waiting," he said, "at the entrance to the Ritz-Carlton when the Count shall arrive from Washington. Then the murder must be done. One of the members will be waiting nearby in an automobile—one that looks very much like a taxicab. I am to leap in that and be driven off. If I am arrested the man driving the motor is to pretend he knows nothing of me, that he is only a hired taxi chauffeur. They have had me," continued d'Montrat, his voice rising shrilly, "practising every day shooting at the dummy figure of a man precisely of the size and proportions of Count Clarendon so that I should not fail when the time came to aim at his heart!"

II.

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ter enough to call the police over the telephone and expose the whole dangerous group. But from this measure Alice Royce shrank. The danger to the life of the little Frenchman would in such case be grave and imminent. "The Liberty Twelve" would of a certainty know that the betrayal had come from him. The other men were of equal murderous inclination as Kruger, d'Montrat had asserted; any that might escape the police would be as merciless as the German in carrying out the vengeance of the assassins' club.

And yet Alice Royce realized that action must swiftly be taken. Count Clarendon's life seemed safe enough with d'Montrat completely in a funk. At any rate he could be watched to see that he did not, impelled by the fear of Kruger and the "group," really attempt to carry out the New York assassination plot.

But what of the other lives—the other men marked for assassination all in the same day—whose deaths were to sweep the world with a sensation of dread and alarm?

The paper on which all their names were entered and the time and place of the contemplated murders set forth were in the clubrooms of "The Liberty Twelve" in — East Seventeenth street. To send d'Montrat back to the clubrooms for this document of such sinister significance was not to be considered. He would not dare the task, or if he did might he not fall back into the power of the other murderous eleven?

The girl detective decided she herself would undertake the securing of this paper and the cabling of swift warnings to those whom she might find named in it as prospective victims of assassins' knives and bullets.

"Have you a key to the clubrooms?" she demanded of the Frenchman. He shook his head negatively. Yes, there was a janitress of the building, but it would have to be a heavy bribe indeed that would induce the woman to allow any one—even the club members, save Kruger, into the rooms. However, Alice Royce, knowing human lives to be at stake on her success in entering these rooms, hesitated no longer than it took to put on her hat and otherwise arrange her attire for the street in clothing that should not be too new or suggest a more than neat stylishness, for the neighborhood where she was to go she knew to be one where a fashionably dressed young woman would attract undue attention. Before departing she slipped a revolver into her handbag. And on the street she sought out a hardware shop. The neatly wrapped parcel she carried with her on leaving the shop contained a brightly bladed hatchet, for the girl detective had decided that desperate cases demand desperate measures. She had determined on hacking open the door of the assassins' club in her effort to secure the paper which had such grave importance in the matter of many prominent lives. The hatchet would also come in handy for splitting open the locked drawer of the desk where the document was concealed.

Her quick observation, however, suggested a better manner of obtaining entrance to the assassins' club, for on her arrival at the address she saw that there was a sign on the old, shabby brick house announcing "Rooms to Let." The fat German woman who answered her ring was doubtful at first about hiring any of the rooms to the young and handsome frau. She averred that the lodgers were all men and save only herself and her daughter there were no women in the house. But on the girl investigator saying she was engaged in business downtown and would only be home at nights, and especially as she appeared quite sat-

isfied at the figures named for rental of the various rooms, the woman consented to permit her to inspect the vacant apartments.

It was the rear room on the second floor that Alice Royce engaged. She paid the rental and was left alone for an inspection of her new quarters.

Only one thing interested Alice Royce about this apartment and she had observed this while talking to the woman of the house; it was, indeed, what had brought her to a quick decision to hire the room. She had seen through the windows the presence of a fire-escape. No sooner was she alone when she opened the window and slipped out on the iron platform; a similar platform overhead was just outside the window of the assassins' club.

But the question was—was the room above empty? Back into her own apartment she crept and waited patiently for fifteen minutes or more listening for the sound of any human presence in the room above. Coming to the conclusion that the room was vacant she climbed out again upon the iron platform and with a quick glance at the neighboring windows in the hope that she was not observed, ascended swiftly the rusty iron ladder to the platform above. Both windows of the club room were thrown wide open—an effort to clear the place of tobacco smoke, the stale odor of which was markedly present to her nostrils as she bent forward and stepped cautiously over the sill. The room was quite empty.

The furnishings were scant. There was an old desk placed near one of the windows and in the center of the room was a big pine table and a dozen or more chairs stood about. An ice-chest that furnished refreshments for the conspirators in their long hours of wrangling and discussion was all else in the room excepting the pictures on the walls. These showed the portraits of Czolgosz, the assassin of McKinley; the regicide who murdered Portugal's King and her apparent; Guiteau, Garfield's murderer, and there was a colored chromo of a painting depicting some of the guillotine horrors of the French revolution. On the center of the table was a grotesque, gruesome object. It was a human skull and set rakishly over the hollow edges was a crown of gilded cardboard. It was the idol of the assassins' club—King Death, the ghastly symbol which they worshipped in their infernal design of improvement for the world.

Without hesitation Alice Royce attacked Kruger's desk with the hatchet she had carried with her for the purpose. Then she saw she had further work to do. Only inconsequential letters and papers lay exposed in the drawer. But also there was in it a flat, black tin despatch box. This she shattered resolutely. When finally the lock was smashed her quickly moving hands soon brought to her eyes the prize she sought.

Kruger had worked with neatness and loving care, it would appear on this list of the first "batch" of lives to be taken. It had been elaborately prepared in red and black ink and was even decorated with death's head drawings, also in red and black. The girl gasped to observe what was written there, the world-famous names of men marked for destruction. Her swiftly moving glance, however, reassured her. The warnings would surely arrive in time to prevent the crimes; d'Montrat had been right; each assassination in Vienna, St. Petersburg, London, Rome, Paris and Madrid had been set for one and the same hour as the circumstances of trapping the victims or of securing the opportunities of approaching them would permit.

"YOU DAMNED LITTLE SPY!"

Alice turned quickly in recoiling amazement. She had heard no sound in the room. She had suspected no other presence. But evidently the splintering of the door of the desk and the breaking of its lock were sufficient sounds to smother the slightest noise that Herr Kruger had made in the turning of the key and opening of the door. For the man who had come in upon her was Herr Kruger, the head of the assassins' club. He stood looking at her with the flashing light of insanity in his blue eyes, his lips under his pale yellow mustache writhing, showing his tobacco stained teeth. He lurched rather than sprang toward her, his hands outstretched, aimed at her throat.

She had laid her handbag upon the desk. There would be no time to reach for it, unclasp it and produce her revolver before she would be in his grasp. The desk stood near the window and the window sash was raised. The girl made up her mind to seek flight by way of the fire-escape. The man might have a weapon; might shoot her. But there seemed to be little choice. If she remained there he would strangle her. There was no mistaking the light in his eyes. It was maniacal.

Even as she came to this decision she saw that he had drawn a revolver.

"If you make a move"—he began. But already she had leaped to the window sill. This act alone saved her, for on that very instant Kruger had discharged a bullet at her. She

stumbled and fell outside on the iron platform. The bullet that would have sunk in her body had struck her right foot with stinging force. She felt a sudden, sharp pain and then a numbness of the limb more frightening than had been the pain.

The girl detective was trying unsuccessfully to cry out for help, trying desperately at the same time to steady her reeling senses.

Then the door within came crashing down. Three men, one a great, stalwart Russian, entered the room pell mell. The big man the next instant had Kruger by the throat and in his grasp the little stout German was plainly powerless. He fought hard to retain and use his revolver, but it was torn from his fingers by a single wrench of the huge Russian's hand.

By nightfall Herr Kruger was on his way to an asylum for the criminal insane.

The secret agents of the Karomanian Government having arrived at Alice Royce's apartments after she had started on her dangerous quest found d'Montrat there still in hysterical fear. They had learned from him the haunts and address of the others of "The Liberty Twelve." Every one had been rounded up by the time Kruger was on his way to the asylum. No charges were made against these men, there being no desire to advertise to the world on what slender chances sometimes the lives of royalty and of those great in statecraft frequently depend. Instead, the next morning on three ships leaving New York harbor the would-be assassins of the anarchistic group were on their way to deportation to their own countries with word sent ahead to the authorities of various cities to watch out for them. Simultaneously in many cities abroad anarchists were being rounded up by the score, the cable having sent to the various foreign governments the names contained in the secret paper of Herr Kruger that Alice Royce had captured.

It was some weeks before the wound in her foot permitted the young woman again to resume activities. Meanwhile, however, by way of comfort there arrived for her from the Karomanian Government a check in four figures and from Count Clarendon a ring containing an emerald that had once glistened in the headdress of an Egyptian queen.

60,000 Letters Daily.

"SHOPPING by mail" has become quite a feature of commercial life in England, but it has not developed to anything like the same extent as it has in this country. Mr. Arnold Bennett, writing in Harper's Magazine, gives a vivid account of an American "mail order" house—one of the great businesses who do all their trade through the mail.

"Go into that house with money in your palm, and ask for a fan or a fiddle and you will be requested to return home and write a letter about the proposed purchase, and stamp the letter and drop it into a mail box, and then to wait till the article arrives at your door.

"That house is one of the most spectacular and pleasing proofs that the inhabitants of the United States are thinly scattered over an enormous area, in tiny groups, often quite isolated from stores. On the day of my visit sixty thousand letters had been received and every executable order contained in these was executed before closing time by the coordinated efforts of over four thousand female employees and over three thousand males. The conception would make Europe dizzy. Imagine a merchant in Moscow trying to inaugurate such a scheme! A little machine no bigger than a soup plate will open hundreds of envelopes at once.

"They are all the same, those envelopes; they have even less individuality than sheep being sheared, but, when the contents of one—any one at random—are put into your hand, something human and distinctive is put into your hand. I read the calligraphy on a blue sheet of paper, and it was written by a woman in Wyoming, a neat, earnest, harassed, and possibly rather harassing woman, and she wanted all sorts of things and wanted them intensely—I could see that with clearness. This complex purchase was an important event in her year. So far as her imagination went, only one mail order would reach the Chicago house that morning, and the entire establishment would be strained to meet it.

"Later, I was on the ground level, in the midst of an enormous apparent confusion—the target for all the packages and baskets, big and little, that shot every instant in a continuous stream from those spiral planes and slid dangerously at me along the floors. Here were the packets. I saw a packer deal with a collected order, and in this order were a number of tiny cookery utensils, a four-cent curling-iron, a brush, and two incredibly ugly pink china mugs, inscribed in cheap gilt respectively with the words 'Father' and 'Mother.' Throughout my stay in America no moment came to me more dramatically than this moment, and none has remained more vividly in my mind."